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REV. MR. HEDGE'S

DISCOURSE

ON THE DEATH OF

WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON,

NINTH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.



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DISCOURSE

ON THE DEATH OF

WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON,

NINTH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES.

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

INDEPENDENT CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY,

ON THE DAY OF THE NATIONAL FAST,

MAY, 14, 1841,

BY

REV. FREDERIC H. HEDGE.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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DISCOURSE.

The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord ; and he delighteth in his way. PSALM 37 : 23.

WE have come together, fellow-citizens, in compliance with the recommendation of our chief magistrate, to solemnize that event which has occupied, of late, so large a place in the public mind, and which has seemed, for a brief space, to concentrate, in one absorbing sentiment, the various and conflicting interests of this far-spread land. We have come to speak of the loss sustained in the death of our Countryman whom we had so lately raised to the highest trust.

It is not the custom of this church to mingle earthly distinctions and the praise of men, and things pertaining to offices and individuals with the sacrifices of that religion which knows neither Prince nor President but only man, and which, rejecting all external distinctions, whether of person or of office, insists on the naked soul. But the case before us, derives from the popular interest which attends it, a moral significance which may justify the emphasis of public and religious rites.

Formal demonstrations in honour of the dead

whom talent or station have rendered conspicuous, are not unusual pageants; but a nation lamenting its chief with that genuine and pungent grief which the death of our late President awakened in the breasts of this people, is a rare spectacle in the scenes of this world. This, and the enthusiasm which attended his nomination and election to the presidential office, point to something in the character of the individual so distinguished, which deserves the homage it has received. We shall do well to consider what has taken such deep hold of the public mind. However popular *judgment* may err in questions of policy and matters of State, popular *feeling* is seldom wrong where individual character is concerned. Other matters are ascertained by an analytic process of the understanding which is always liable to deceive, but character appeals to certain instincts in our nature, which discriminate with infallible tact, the true from the false and the evil from the good. The people are never entirely mistaken in their idols. Speciousness may impose for awhile, but no character that is not based in real merit can maintain a permanent hold on the public regard. A moral attraction sure as gravitation binds homage to virtue. There may be disturbing forces; but, on the whole, the heart of a nation gravitates to individual worth, as inevitably, as the earth to the sun.

I say then, that the general and hearty enthusiasm with which this man was honored, indicates something worthy of honour to which that feeling

referred. We will allow something for excitement, something for the usual exaggerations of party-zeal; still we shall be forced to admit at last, that, where so much feeling was elicited, there must have been a ground for it in genuine worth. In what that worth consisted we have now to enquire.

General Harrison was not a great man in the sense in which that epithet is usually bestowed. There was, in him, no prominence of single traits; none of that projective force which causes an extraordinary development of one faculty or tendency and makes a man conspicuous in that direction. No "flash and outbreak of a fiery mind." No "vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself." No creative genius,—no grand, original conception realizing itself by live-long devotion to a single aim. None of these things were found in him. There wanted also the opportunity of greatness which will sometimes occur to those who do not create it for themselves. Some men "achieve greatness" by the force of their genius. Others become great through their adaptation to the exigencies of the times into which they are born. Cæsar and Frederic II. and Charles XII. would have distinguished themselves in any position or age. Our own Washington, although, in any station, he must have been the same great soul, might not have been distinguished, had he been born into other conditions. There was wanting, in the life of Harrison, a prominent position and crisis to test

his uttermost power. His achievements, however important and however creditable in themselves, lay too far in the back ground of human affairs to secure for their author that fame which accompanies actions performed on a more public stage. He had no part assigned him in the theatre of nations; and when, at last, he had reached a station which brought him more prominently before the eyes of the world, it was only to exchange it, at the very entrance, for new and untried regions, in the onward progress of the soul.

We will not, therefore, call him a great man in the historical sense. We will not assert for him a place among the chiefs of the World. He is not in the catalogue of the Cæsars or the Washingtons. History will not number him among the foremost few. The ages will not bear his impress or sound his name.

And yet there is a sense in which he too may be called great, if judged by his character rather than his works. I find in him all the essential elements of that greatness which distinguished the heroes of antiquity. A large patriotic soul, forgetfulness of self, honesty, simplicity, courage, patience,—all those virtues which flowered in Athenian and Roman history and which embalm the memory of their world-famed men. I find in his republican manners and highminded patriotism, a close resemblance to those ancient worthies. Let us not deceive ourselves with foreign sounds. We tickle our fancy with Athens and Rome. Aristides, Phocion, Fabius and Scipio ;—classic

antiquity and early associations have diffused a charm around these honored names ; but we may find heroic natures nearer home. When, in our school-days, we read of Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, how he was called from the plough to be made dictator of Rome, we form to ourselves an idea of moral sublimity, not to be paralleled in this age of the world. Let us not forget that we have seen the same thing enacted in our own day, on a far grander scale. We have seen a nation with a territory equal to a hundred Romes, selecting from among her millions, the farmer at his plough, to wield the supreme power in the land.

I say, I find in this man the same virtues which figure in those old republics. I find in him the man whom Plutarch or Nepos would have loved to describe,—whom Athens, in her best days, would have placed at the head of affairs, and whom Rome would have been proud to number among her sons. A man of severe virtue, to whom Xerxes and Alexander would have offered their bribes in vain,—whom the elephants of Pyrrhus would have not dismayed, nor the spoils of Carthage have seduced from his frugal life.

Thus great in the elements of his character, he was not, I repeat, a great man in the historical sense. His life exhibits no splendid achievements, no brilliant results, nothing that fills the mouth and eye. Utility, not splendor characterized his way of life. Neither was he a great man in that meaner sense to which many aspire. In

these flaunting, forward times, when every man's life is in print, and small things and small men occupy the front rank in the public eye ; it is no deduction from his merit, but rather a presumption in his favour, that he was not a notorious man,—not, till dragged before the public by the events of the past year, a man of the press,—not one of whom it is said, Lo, here ! and Lo, there ! and with whom all morning and evening newspapers are filled. A most quiet, unassuming man,—a man who after serving his country for forty years, with action and with counsel, had retired, in the primitive way, to cultivate his acres with his own hands ; and whose real excellence would have remained unknown to thousands of his countrymen, had not the call to assume once more a public function, brought him into note.

In neither of these senses then, neither in the historical nor the vulgar sense was he a great man. But read his biography and what do you find ? You find a man equal to every exigency which required his service. You find a man placed in various and very trying situations, requiring great wisdom, great integrity, great courage ; and always equal to his post. Whether presiding over the new colonies of the West, and training up those young States to future greatness and independence,—whether treating with savage Tecumsehs in time of peace, or battling them in time of war,—whether opposed to British discipline or Indian wiles,—whether representing his country, as delegate in the national

council or as ambassador in a foreign State ; you find him still the same,—an able, clearsighted, sound-hearted, right sufficient man.

View him as governor of Indiana, under which appellation was then included the whole of the Northwest territory not yet admitted into the Union. Never, before or since, in the history of this country, have such extent of territory and such absolute jurisdiction been confided to one man. Over all that portion of the United States which lies beyond the Ohio and the Mississippi, he possessed an almost unlimited authority. In him was vested the sole power, subject to no other board, of confirming grants of land, under the claims specified by law,—a power so liable to abuse that it is difficult to conceive how a Government, jealous of its subjects' rights, should have vested so much in irresponsible hands. His wise and conscientious exercise of this power is not the least of his merits.

Already, as representative of the Northwest territory in Congress, he had rendered an invaluable service to that part of the country, in procuring the passage of a law which took the lands from the power of wealthy monopolists, and placed them within the reach of the industrious settlers who were already drawing their subsistence from the soil. To this measure, the value of which it is impossible to exaggerate, the West owes, in no small degree, its present advancement and prosperity.

In his capacity of governor of Indiana, he

was empowered to treat with the Indians for the sale of lands,—a task attended with great difficulty and some danger, owing to the jealous feelings (nourished by the British Government) with which the Indian regarded the encroachments of the white man on his wild domain. By these treaties he gained for the United States a considerable portion of their present territory,—more than was ever ceded by the Indians in any other compact.

Whatever credit is due to him, as a diplomatist, in these negotiations, is far surpassed by his merits as a Christian philanthropist, in providing for the welfare of the savages themselves, and in endeavouring to mitigate, as far as possible, the evils which civilization had heaped on their devoted heads. Among these, the most prominent and the most formidable, then, as ever, was the use of spirituous liquors,—the floating hell of the white man, which the tide of selfish traffic had floated into the midst of their communities, and which was fast spreading damnation and death through their tribes. In one of his speeches to the Legislature of Indiana, he remarks: “The policy of the United States with regard to the savages within their territories, forms a striking contrast with the conduct of other civilized nations. It is in the United States alone that laws have been passed not only for their safety and protection from every species of injury, but considerable sums of money have been appropriated and agents have been employed to hu-

manize their minds and instruct them in such arts of civilized life, as they are capable of receiving. To provide a substitute for the chase, from which they derive their support, and which, from the extension of our settlements is daily becoming more precarious, has been considered a sacred duty. The humane and benevolent intentions of the government, however, will forever be defeated unless effectual measures are devised to prevent the sale of ardent spirits to this unhappy people. The law which has been passed by Congress for that purpose has been found entirely ineffectual, because its operation has been construed to relate to the Indian country exclusively. In calling your attention to this subject, gentlemen, I am persuaded that it is unnecessary to remind you that the article of compact makes it your duty to attend to it. The interests of your constituents, the interests of the miserable Indians, and your own feelings will sufficiently urge you to take it into your most serious consideration, and to provide the remedy which is to save thousands of your fellow creatures. You are witnesses to the abuses ; you have seen our towns crowded with furious and drunken savages, our streets flowing with their blood, their arms and clothing bartered for the liquor that destroys them, and their miserable women and children enduring all the extremities of cold and hunger. So destructive has the progress of intemperance been among them that whole villages have been swept away. It is with

you, gentlemen, to divert from these children of Nature the ruin that hangs over them. Nor can I believe that the time will be considered mis-spent, which is devoted to an object so consistent with the spirit of Christianity, and with the principles of republicanism."

On another occasion, he uses in reference to the impunity with which Indians were murdered in the new settlements, the following language: "Whilst we rigorously exact of them the delivery of every murderer of a white man, the neglect, on our part, to punish similar offences committed on them, forms a strong and just ground of complaint for which I can offer no excuse or palliation. A powerful nation rendering justice to a petty tribe of savages is a sublime spectacle, worthy of a great republic, and worthy of a people who have shown themselves as valiant in war, as, in peace moderate and forbearing."

I dwell the rather on this passage in the life of our late President, because it contrasts so sharply with the injuries our country has since inflicted on this ill-fated race; thereby soiling our fair fame with a blot which the memory of Washington and all the glories of the Revolution cannot efface, and for which, so surely as eternal Justice presides over human affairs, we shall yet reap the bitter reward.

That part of Harrison's life, to which the attention of his countrymen has been chiefly directed, and on which his reputation is chiefly based, is his military career, as Commander-in-

chief of the Northwestern Campaign. Though not more important in itself, nor displaying greater talent than the rest of his public services, it has been brought into greater prominence, for this reason, that military services are more easily estimated than civil, and have a greater fascination for the common mind.

It is for military men to fix the precise value of his conduct in that campaign,—a service, which, owing to the character of the troops employed, the wide territory it embraced, the nature of the soil and the savage allies whom the enemy had called to their aid,—seems to have been attended with peculiar hardships, without those brilliant chances of distinction which war, under ordinary conditions, affords. But, without military insight, every one can estimate the hardihood and patience of fatigue, the self-devotion, the tender consideration and humane treatment of the soldiers under his command, which our countryman manifested during that dreary war. Every one can estimate the unsleeping vigilance which was needed to baffle the frequent wiles of a savage foe, and the ready tact of that manoeuvre by which the British were routed at the battle of the Thames. Every one can estimate his forbearance toward the enemy, so strongly contrasted with their own conduct at the river Raisin. But the most decisive proof of his military virtues is to be found in the perfect confidence and warm attachment of his soldiers, which no General can retain, for any length

of time, without possessing the virtues proper to his calling,—the valour and the tact which that confidence and attachment suppose. In this respect General Harrison was particularly fortunate. No General, ancient or modern, has succeeded in attaching men more devotedly to himself. We will allow him all the merit which that devotion implies.

Look next at his legislative course,—by no means the least remarkable part of his eventful life. In the history of American legislation there are few men whose action has been so clear and practical, so patriotic in its spirit, so farlooking and benevolent in the objects at which it aimed. Unlike many of our legislators who take their seats in the national council with no definite object in view, he went thither with a distinct idea of certain ends to be accomplished,—not for his own, but for his country's good. He went thither with no sectional feeling or party purpose, but with views which embraced the whole country in their application, and plans which regarded equally the welfare of every part. He went not to represent a district or faction, but to represent the American People.

The bill which proposed a more efficient system of militia, in order to obviate the necessity of a standing army, though objectionable,—perhaps impracticable, in some of its features, and though rejected by Congress, shows how strongly his thoughts were bent on the public good : and the Report accompanying that bill, exhibits a

deep insight into the moral of history, and bears evident marks of a philosophic mind. The Pension-bill, designed to secure from want the surviving soldiers of the Revolution, owed its passage chiefly to his exertions, and constitutes one of the noblest acts in the history of Congress and his own.

Behold him, lastly, Minister Plenipotentiary to the Government of Colombia, where the stern simplicity of his character is said to have presented a striking contrast with the views and manners of the new republicans. His appointment to this office was coincident with the period when Simon Bolivar, the *Liberador*, had begun to assume the attitude of a more absolute power than seemed consistent with the liberal views he had hitherto professed. The letter which Harrison addressed to him on this subject, is the most remarkable act of his mission, and the last, of any importance, which preceded his retirement from public life. Were this the only document or witness of himself, our countryman had left us, I should gather from this alone, the idea of a noble-minded, true-hearted, well-endowed, and thoroughly good man. I do not remember a similar performance more full of generous sentiment and just views, more eloquent and wise; and though a mere diplomatist would have seen the uselessness of such a letter addressed to such a man; a sound heart will respect the very simplicity of character which thought to operate by such means, and chose the nearest way to a noble

end. Let every American peruse this document, who would know what manner of man this was, on whom the People had conferred their highest gift. I shall ask your permission to quote the closing paragraph.

“To the eyes of military men, the laurels you have won on the fields of Vargas, Bayac and Carebobo will be forever green. But will that content you? Are you willing that your name should descend to posterity among the mass of those whose fame has been derived from shedding human blood without a single advantage to the human race? Or shall it be united to that of Washington, as the founder and father of a great and happy people? The choice is before you. The friends of liberty throughout the world, and the people of the United States in particular, are waiting your decision with intense anxiety. Alexander toiled and conquered to attain the applause of the Athenians; will you regard, as nothing, the opinions of a nation which has evinced its superiority over that celebrated people in the science most useful to man, by having carried into actual practice a system of government, of which the wisest Athenians had but a glimpse in theory, and considered as a blessing never to be realized, however ardently to be desired? The place which you are to occupy in their esteem depends upon yourself. Farewell.”

I have touched some of those points in the history of our good President with which my own

imagination has been most strongly impressed. Your recollections will fill up the meagre outline with many traits and anecdotes which illustrate, more forcibly than any abstract I can present, the moral beauty of his most active and exemplary life. In summing up our judgment, we will say of him, in one word ; he was a patriot. A genuine patriot, if ever public servant deserved that name. One who identified his own interest with that of his country. Say rather, who entirely lost sight of his own interest in single devotion to his country's good. A self-forgetful, wholly disinterested man. His zeal was unmixed with any baser motive. A genuine patriot. One whom, in this particular, we can place by the side of Washington, Jefferson and the Adamses. A man who would be measured by what he could do for his country—not by what his country might do for him. He had the Christian idea of greatness :—"whoso would be chief among you let him be your servant."

An honest man. Not the honesty of prudence which shuns the law ; but a lofty simplicity, which knew no device to snatch even at lawful good, by availing himself of such advantages, as his official capacity might place within his reach. He never thought to enrich himself at the public cost. As Governor of Indiana, with an almost unlimited control of the public lands, he was none the better, in a worldly point of view, for having held that trust. As soldier, he is even said to have sacrificed something from his own small means, and to have made the nation his

debtor in a pecuniary, as well as in a moral sense. Yet not a careless man, either, in his private economy. Not too great to look after his own affairs, and to live within his means. A frugal liver ;—one who never burthened his fellow-citizens with his private debts, nor needed any rich friends to repair his careless extravagance. A frugal liver. Not a man of equipage and show ; but plain and simple, as becometh one professing democracy. Our American Fabius we will call him,—the relic of a purer age.

A humane man, tender hearted, never ready to give, and to forgive. When his soldiers got discontented and threatened to desert, he reclaimed them by gentle usage and kind words fitly spoken. Nor in one instance, during that hard campaign, did he cause to be inflicted those degrading punishments which military discipline prescribes. The very assassin who attempted his life, was suffered to go free. Once, in his civil capacity, he deemed it necessary, in self-justification, to prosecute an individual who had slandered his official conduct. Heavy damages were adjudged, two-thirds of which were afterwards restored to the defamer, and the remainder bestowed on some orphans, whose fathers had perished in the wars of the Revolution.

Lastly, a religious man, godly and devout. In this respect, it must be confessed, somewhat behind the times. Not quite up with the newest developments. He fancied, in his simplicity, that religion was still a matter of duty, and not of taste merely. He believed in a church. He

fancied old truths to be still true—old customs to be still precious,—old laws to be still binding. Occupied, all his life long, with public affairs, he had not had time to look into those matters. He had not got beyond ordinances. He had not grown to be independent of God, but was content to serve him in the old bible way, with church-going and prayers. A religious man, godly and devout.

Such was our good President and fellow-citizen, whose recent departure we have been called to meditate, this day. Not a great man, but a good man. A useful man; one who satisfies, I think, our Idea of an American citizen;—thoroughly republican in all his views and ways. A friend of the people; without using that phrase as a watchword to flatter and cajole them. A servant of the people,—one who labored in their employ with the earnest devotion of head and heart and hand; not for lucre's sake or fame's sake, but for duty's, and theirs. Ever more intent on the work than on the wages. An American citizen. Many virtues are included in that denomination. A noble appellation, if rightly understood. I know of but one that is more honorable or more comprehensive. We will give him that one. Forgetting all partial distinctions and national predilections, and taking our stand in the centre of humanity, we will say of him; he was a *man*. For what merit is there, that is not comprehended in that single word? Or how is it possible to predicate of any one a more exceeding worth, than to say that he fulfills our idea of a *man*:—

that Humanity in him did justify itself;—that all of good which our nature contains, was manifest in his character and life.

I have not represented him as a man of extraordinary powers. I do not so regard him. Nor do I consider the possession of such powers as the highest praise. It needs no extraordinary powers to make a man useful and eminent. An average capacity being given, place and circumstance will develop the requisite powers, provided the requisite virtues are there,—provided there exists, as in the case before us, a high sense of moral obligation, and an ardent desire to do the best. But the requisite virtue must not be wanting. Place and circumstance will never produce that, nor make any man eminent without it. Whatever was extraordinary in our fellow-citizen, belonged to his character, rather than his talents. Not that talent was wanting, but that goodness did abound. And this I consider to be the moral of his life, and would now urge as the lesson proper for this occasion,—that *character*, in public men, has a value above intellectual gifts.

Let me not be misunderstood. A certain amount of intellect is, of course, supposed. Every office requires, for the right discharge of its duties, certain mental qualifications, without which no man can fill that office as it should be filled. No qualities of the heart, in a public servant, will compensate for defects of mind; nor can an inefficient man become a useful functionary, solely by dint of moral worth. A cer-

tain amount of intellect must be supposed. It is not necessary to fix the standard ; the public estimate will take care of that. What I mean is this,—that the requisite ability being given, moral principle is more desirable than extraordinary powers. Character is a better security for good government than talent. Trust the good man and not the great man with your affairs. Not till the people thoroughly understand and carefully apply this rule, will their interests prosper in the hands of their servants.

We are apt to set an undue value on rare and brilliant gifts and to fancy, because a man is eloquent and has a trick to charm the ear with the subtlety of his logic, or to stir the heart with impassioned words ; or, because he possesses extraordinary skill in finance, that, therefore, the public welfare must needs flourish in his hands. These gifts have unquestionably great value and cannot be too thankfully acknowledged when they are found combined with moral qualities ; but when divorced from moral qualities, they are mischievous just in proportion as they are powerful. Then they are cunning weapons in murderous hands. Trust the good man and not the great man, where you can have but one. Men talk of able politicians and call politics an intricate science, requiring great astuteness to guide their tangled course to happy issues. It is true, there are points of legislation which present difficulties to the understanding. Questions come up for debate, the whole bearing of which is not immediately apparent and which need to

be carefully studied before they can be acted on with safety. Yet even then, if justice is the course by which legislators steer—and if it is not, then no good can possibly come of legislation—moral tact will go further than political tact; and sound sense and proper information being supposed, an honest intent is a better guide than vulpine cunning.

It is your intricate men that make politics intricate,—men who love circuitous methods and have two ways about them. Let it be understood that the policy of honest dealing is the true policy, in public matters, as well as in private; and that the question, what is politic? is always involved in the previous question, what is honest? and much of this intricacy will be done away. Have honest men, and you will have honest measures. Have honest measures, and you will have politic ones.

Let the public servant also, on his part, and all who aim at public station, lay to heart the lesson which teaches the importance of moral worth, in public life. It concerns their welfare, not less than it does the public weal. You may not separate between your policy and your character. Your character must determine your final success. It is your principles, and not your tactics that will stead you in the end. You will promote your own interests most surely, by faithfully promoting the interests entrusted to your care. A People may be blinded for awhile, but they try their servant by his works, at last, and their final judgment is always correct. Their sen-

tence is never more severe than when it falls on those who have deceived their expectations and betrayed their trust ; and never is their homage more genuine, their recompense never more certain, than when they have discovered sound principle and high integrity in public life.

All men, in a treacherous world, seek something to lean upon and trust,—some foundation on which they may anchor and rest securely. Talent is like water, tempting to the eye but false to the foot. It glances in the sun, it dances in the breeze, beautiful to behold in its changeful play. But no stability attends it, no security does it afford. It yields to every pressure,—the winds sway it as they list. But plant yourself in principle and you shall not only stand firm yourself, but men shall build upon you, and rely upon you, and stake their dearest on the rock-foundations of your stable soul. All who probe you shall say, ‘here is sure footing.’ All who depend on you, shall rejoice in your strength, with a feeling such as the storm-tossed mariner feels, when, after a long conflict with the treacherous waves, he plants his foot, at length, on the firm and faithful earth.

And now, before we part, we will say farewell ! to the honoured patriot whose shade we have summoned to warn and instruct us in the path of life. Called from the shades of a late retirement into brief publicity and momentary triumph, he has passed again, by swift transition, to deeper shades than any his beloved Ohio waters, and to

higher honours, we trust, than any his beloved country could confer.

‘He sleeps well.’ We call this a day of fasting, we come hither to mourn a faithful servant and friend, too soon removed from our midst. We have hung round our temple the ensigns of woe. We have cause to mourn, when we think of the fond hopes we have buried with him. But we have greater cause to rejoice, when we consider how beautifully opportune, to him, was that death which has fallen so heavily upon us. We will forget our own sorrows when we think of his triumph, who, to borrow the words of the Roman historian, was so “happy, not only in the brightness of his life, but also in the season of his death.” We will not mourn but congratulate him rather that “he lies safe in his shroud” where the importunities of office, and the voice of complaint, and the wranglings of selfish ambition, can reach him no more. We will congratulate him that the summit of earthly glory was, to him, but the mount of ascension to higher glories in heavenly places. That he was permitted to crown himself with the highest honours his country could bestow, and then to depart before the crown of honour had become a crown of thorns.

Farewell, brave soldier! Thy battles are over, thy field is won, thy laurels are sure. Farewell, kind counsellor! Thy voice is hushed, thy lips are sealed, thy counsels remain. Farewell, faithful servant! Thy works are accepted, thy example yet speaketh.





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